

Movie review: Mission to Mars

Rating: PG

Year of Release: 2000

Time: 113 minutes

Cast: Jim McConnell: Gary Sinise

Woody Blake: Tim Robbins

Luke Graham: Don Cheadle

Terri Fisher: Connie Nielsen

Phil Ohlmyer: Jerry O'Connell

Buzz Aldrin isn't overwhelmed by Mission to Mars.

According to entertainment weekly Variety, former astronaut Aldrin thinks the Touchstone film, which opens March 10, will be a big hit with UFO buffs, but warns that the film "lacks a little reality at times."

"I'm afraid there's a few things in this movie that couldn't quite happen," Aldrin told Variety at the movie's gala Hollywood premiere.

He reportedly also "rolled his eyes" at the idea of the astronauts in the film taking their helmets off under any circumstance, no matter how seemingly benign.

Mission to Mars: Red
Planet Beckons De
Palma, Story
Musgrave

By Robert Peterson

special to SPACE.com
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The advance word is that accuracy rules in Disney's Mission to Mars. The first of two Mars-themed movies coming out this year (Warner Brothers' Red Planet opens November 10),

Mission has been a NASA-friendly project from the start.

"Many aspects of the script are based on NASA science theory and how they would actually plan a mission," Mission producer Tom Jacobson said.

Filmmakers signed a Space Act agreement with NASA to ensure accuracy. According to director Brian De Palma, the space technology in the film from spaceships and vehicles to the actual procedure to get there is either on the drawing board or approved for development.

Astronaut approved

In other words, there's a good chance we'll use the same means to get to Mars as the characters in the film, which opens March 10.

"We're trying to make it like NASA would," De Palma said.

Former NASA astronaut Joe Allen, who served De Palma as consultant, said the film rated a nine out of 10 for accuracy.

"It's very close," he said. "There were some privileges taken, but very few."

Besides many consulting duties, Allen and former astronaut Story Musgrave helped the actors add realism to their spacewalking performance.

Brian De Palma: Making the movie NASA would make?
Mission to Mars Superbowl trailer: [large - 9MB] [medium - 6MB]

How we get there

The NASA commitment started when Jacobson came across an excerpt from Robert Zubrin's non-fiction book *The Case for Mars*. Zubrin, founder and president of the Mars Society and senior vice president of the Space Society, was hired as consultant during script development and Jacobson later bought the rights to the book.

"There was so much detail ... about how to go to Mars," Jacobson said. "Once we started pre-production [work], we gave the book to practically everyone involved in the movie. It's very inspirational."

So what's in there? Again, remember that NASA has only projected that an actual Mars trip would incorporate this technology. Most of the planning for a real crewed mission to the Red Planet still in the conceptual stage.

The movie follows Zubrin's multi-stage idea for how to get there. NASA sends an uncrewed ship to Mars. Robots from the ship then convert the Martian atmosphere and soil into fuel for the return trip.

Finally, a second ship -- this time carrying humans -- flies to Mars with the command module and living habitat.

Mars, the "friendly" planet?

The crewed ship in the film has a 50-foot revolving wheel, which simulates gravity through centrifugal force. Although that technology is years away, a much smaller (2-1/2-meter) centrifugal wheel is planned to go up to the actual international space station when completed.

We also see the International Space Station in the film, but with the fictitious addition of another revolving space wheel. This wheel houses Mars Mission Control, from where all Mars missions are launched.

The level of detail goes beyond the screen. For example, the space suits used in the film have cooling systems similar to real space suits, while the Mars habitat in the film has a

greenhouse that makes oxygen and food.

And for Mars itself, filmmakers brought in Matt Golombek, chief scientist on the Pathfinder mission and an expert on the Martian surface, to make sure they got the look right.

Art directors transformed 55 acres south of Vancouver into the Red Planet by sculpting sand dunes and covering them with a sprayable form of concrete. Set decorators then used fire hoses to paint the set with 120,000 gallons of environmentally-friendly red paint.

"The way I perceive it, Mars is a very friendly place to go," Musgrave said after he first saw the Mars set. "It beckons."

Where the story lies...

But despite its accuracy, advance buzz on the film has been mixed.

One independent reviewer said De Palma "would be hard-pressed to top himself after this one," and that the film even surpassed Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* in its treatment of standard science fiction concepts.

But other Internet voices have criticized the film's "cheesy" script and less-than-stellar special effects.

The biggest criticism is that the filmmakers have borrowed too much from other sci-fi movies.

"Mission to Mars is pretty much a scene-for-scene rip-off of three other movies," said an Ain't-It-Cool-News source. "Most notably *The Abyss* and *2001* for obvious reasons, right down to the soothing voice of the ship's computer and even some of the music."

See also:

http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/m/mission_mars.html